On 22 July 2009, the European Commission announced the allocation of EU funds to the twenty-two Member States participating in the ‘School Fruit Scheme’ (SFS). This is a landmark decision for public health because for the first time, a key EU policy has integrated public health interests as an implicit policy objective.

The SFS aims to improve children’s diets by sustainably increasing the consumption of fruit and vegetables through the creation of healthy eating habits. Increasing fruit and vegetable consumption is a public health priority as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and by the EU. Specifically, the EU SFS targets children early in life by increasing accessibility to fruit and vegetables in school environments.

As of September 2009, there will be an annual budget of €157M (of which €90M (57%) are Community funds) available to Member States to provide fruit and vegetables as part of a newly established or expanded SFS. The EU funds will come from within the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), one of the core competence areas of the EU with a long history and substantial funds.

**Public health objectives**

For the first time, the rather general Article 152(1) of the Treaty requiring “a high level of human health protection in all Community policies” is implicitly used to establish a concrete and well-funded policy measure within an EU mainstream policy, the CAP. The sustainable increase of demand for fruit and vegetables by creating healthy eating habits in children does not merely aim at increasing quantity (i.e., calories from agricultural produce) but also at improving the quality of children’s diet with the long term goal of improving public health. In contrast, other EU agriculture policy measures, such as School Milk and Food Aid to Most Deprived Persons (MDP), were originally created to dispose of surplus products in order to relieve the respective markets, and have failed to address public health goals.

The SFS, on the contrary, is driven by demand: Member States’ competent authorities are given funding to purchase products of their choice on the market. Eligible products are defined as all fresh and processed fruit and vegetables, including tropical fruit and bananas from third countries. Products that contain added sugar, salt or fat are not eligible, and products incorporated in national schemes must be approved by a competent Member State health authority. This clearly gives priority to health objectives, compared to other schemes that give priority to market impact objectives.

Furthermore, accompanying measures must be defined by Member States in order to receive funding. Accompanying measures aim to proactively integrate parents and teachers and link the scheme to public health, education and agriculture in a comprehensive effort to create environments that support healthy eating habits in children. Although these measures receive no direct EU support, they are to be defined in the strategy clearly demonstrating their contribution to the scheme’s overall objectives.

A key element of the policy management is the ‘Strategy’, which must be developed for each geographical level, i.e. national, regional or municipal, for which the respective Member State chooses to create a SFS. Only a limited number of criteria are obligatory, such as the budget,
duration, and target group, a list of eligible produce, stakeholders and accompanying measures of a SFS.

Strategies have a dual purpose: to ensure that programmes meet the objectives set forth by the Commission and to provide a framework for evaluation and comparing Member State schemes. Strategies are multi-annual, providing a sustainable framework and avoiding short term political and budget constraints to adequately combat the long term problems associated with poor nutrition and obesity. The ‘Strategy’ itself is not formally approved by the Commission but submitted for information and publication. The main objective of this document is therefore not to fulfil a legal obligation but rather to initiate an internal discussion process in the respective Member States, bringing together the relevant stakeholders and sectors to agree on a sustainable framework for a long term approach.

**Public health in implementation**

Public health experts and stakeholders have played an important role in the design of the SFS. They will continue to do so as the programme is implemented. First, the design process offered the opportunity to open up existing Commission platforms for interaction with the agriculture sector (producers, trade and industry) to include public health stakeholders and experts. This increased cooperation was highlighted during a major conference, driven largely by public health expertise, in December 2008 in Brussels, entitled: *School Fruit: a healthy start for our children – Promoting School Fruit Schemes in the European Union*.

Currently, this cooperation is being institutionalised with the creation of a permanent expert group to shadow the management and implementation of the EU-wide SFS. This tool will provide technical expertise, i.e., methodology for evaluation and monitoring of the SFS. At the same time, it will ensure that the effectiveness of Member States’ schemes with respect to the overall objective of improving public health is maintained.

Compared to other voluntary schemes, the SFS has a high uptake, twenty-two of twenty-seven Member States are implementing the scheme. Throughout the policy development process transparent communication was used, both as an end and as a means. On the one hand, to raise awareness for the proposal and the underlying problem, as well as on-going initiatives in the Member States, and consequently to create public support for the proposal. On the other hand, it aims to create positive peer pressure on Member States by publishing all relevant documents, notably the Strategies as well as monitoring and evaluation reports. The interested public will thus be able to judge for themselves about the effectiveness of the scheme in their respective Member States. In addition, this transparency will facilitate the comparison of schemes between Member States and foster the development of best-practice examples.

Unfortunately, recently published strategies illustrate several problems at EU and Member State levels. The strategies are difficult to understand and compare because a standardised format is not used and strategies are only published in the Member State’s language. Published strategies also indicate problems with eligible products, and may require a stronger definition of eligible or non-eligible products by the Commission. Ironically, Greece has only includes processed fruit and juice in its programme, which contradicts the original goal of the programme, to increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables.

Establishing both expert and stakeholder groups to address these issues should be a priority to ensure the programme is successful and effective in meeting its goals. Even more so, transparency and accountability of the SFS should remain as an underlying principle and be ensured by an overall evaluation to be undertaken by independent contractors. The results of this exercise will be reflected in the assessment report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, which is due in August 2012.

**Perspectives**

The discussion on the future allocation of European funds will take place within budget negotiations for the next seven-year financial framework 2013–2021. These are expected to start in earnest in 2011, corresponding to when the SFS assessment report is to be published.

Within the EU budget negotiations, the CAP funds will play an important role: similar to the process in the 1980s, when the CAP started to reflect the environmental impact of agriculture production, the focus today is increasingly on the impact of agriculture production on human health. However, quality is still mainly defined in terms of quality of production. Human health is not a criterion in establishing EU funding in investment support or direct payments.

However, public health could be a crucial partner in delivering legitimacy to continued CAP funding for European farmers through the creation of a full-fledged EU food quality policy with the objective of reconciling *quality of production with quality of consumption* for food. This would require creating a horizontal approach within the EU’s agriculture policy to enhance quality and diversity throughout the whole food chain, ensuring a positive health impact and the highest possible food safety standards for all agriculture products deemed fit for human consumption.

Consequently, the EU SFS, although small in budgetary terms and limited in objectives, is a first attempt at integrating public health objectives within a programme directly linked to the market management measures within CAP. The programme should not be seen as a small, one off programme, but rather as a catalyst that has set in motion long term changes within the CAP, introducing public health, with its stakeholders, their perspectives and new approaches, as an integral part of the mainstream (agriculture) policy.

**References**